

# LATIN ON THE LOUGH

**McLouis Lagan 253 on MWB Fiat Ducato 2.3JTD**

*Di Johnson does the Highland fling in a budget-conscious Italian with a Scottish/Irish name*

The low profile format is practically de rigueur in France. You can see hoards of them parked on aires de service and campsites, so it makes a change to see what the Italians can do with this body shape. The low profile looks good because it's less bread-van-like than ordinary overcab coachbuilts. More TGV than 125, it's surely an easier shape to push along at seventy than the equivalent bulbous-luton coachbuilt. You will lose the valuable storage space and berths that a conventional luton provides, but when confronted by a low railway bridge, my, won't you be grateful.

A three-berth low profile for an on the road price of £29,998 (or, as you or I would say, £30,000) with a spacious garage, is worth a close inspection. You don't expect a myriad of bells and whistles for that sort of price. But many of these bells can be easily managed without or retrofitted when funds allow.

One omission that ought to be mentioned is the lack of rear seatbelts. This means two for travelling, with provision for a visitor when sited. A couple of outdoor activity enthusiasts, or someone who likes to carry plenty of comfortable outdoor seating and tables, will appreciate the commodious garage. It's big enough to carry a

small scooter on board, just right for touring the countryside or a shopping trip after settling on a campsite.

An Italian-built motorhome from a company with a Scottish-sounding name is confusing enough before you realize that 'Lagan' is a beautiful valley and river in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. It's a popular area for recreation, so I can see the connection with this 'van.

Don Amott Leisure kindly provided the Lagan 253 for testing. The business is situated at Hilton, near Derby. It is the sole importer of McLouis, Elnagh, SeA and Joint motorcaravans. The late Don Amott started by selling caravans 40 years ago. The name has passed to the original owner's son, usefully also named Don.

## **MORE ITALIAN LAKE THAN IRISH LOUGH?**

The Lagan 253 is basically a white 'van; we wouldn't expect anything more at this price. An oval green graphic with a white '253' is positioned in the middle of both front doors, making the McLouis look as if it were part of a hire fleet. However, the painterly green and blue freestyle lines along the side panels are much more artistic. The colours only hint at a tartan



*The garage is generous in both size and payload: the spare wheel is positioned inside the garage right beside the door.*



*Beech-trimmed cupboards with silver handles, and blue upholstery, will please lovers of the up-to-date. This view to the rear shows L-shaped kitchen with washroom on the offside, opposite the wardrobe. At the rear is a large over-garage double bed.*

connection, while pale dove-grey skirts help the vehicle appear lower than it actually is.

Although this is a right-hand drive model, the caravan door is on the offside and exiting beside a busy road needs your full attention, especially with youngsters aboard. The toilet cassette servicing hatch is behind the caravan door - and the garage, not surprisingly, comes last. The big advantage of a high fixed rear bed, apart from no bed-making chores last thing at night, is the freedom to carry all sorts of kit in the voluminous garage space below. A small scooter weighing up to 100kg (payload permitting) may be carried in the garage, and a ramp is available as an optional extra for loading purposes.

The spare wheel is attached to the garage bulkhead (conveniently near the door). Because it's placed above a ledge, which runs the width of the garage, it doesn't clutter the floor. Sliding

large objects across the back will be effortless. Bent over, I could move about inside with ease, making this an easy space to load. However, a word of caution: a large rear overhang means that you will have to be very careful about weight distribution and rear axle loading. If you have any doubts, you should always confirm maximum axle weights and visit your local public weighbridge to check that you are in no way overloaded.

The rear panel has a high window, which lights the rear bed, plus a high-level stop light - but is otherwise uncluttered, except for a few graphics. With a sizeable garage it should stay this way, as there's no need for bike racks and rear boxes on this vehicle.

**A MCLouis MOMENT**

There are three shallow storage shelves moulded into the inside of the caravan door, but the two

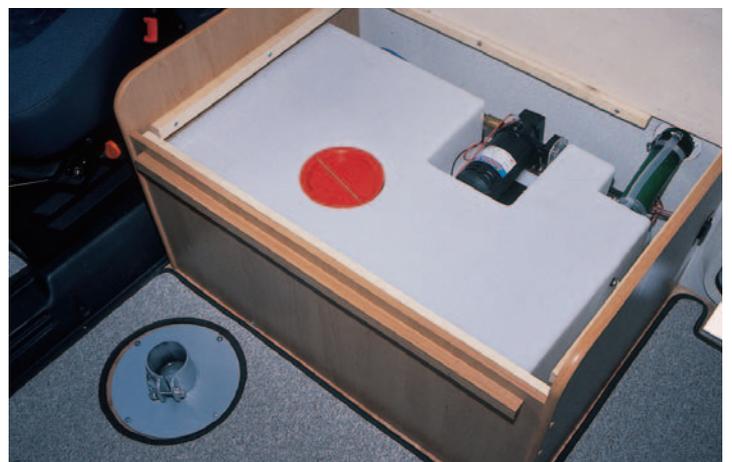
plastic turnbuckles, at the top and bottom of the door (for added security) are of more interest. Anything that makes us feel more secure in our beds has to be a good idea. Perhaps it's a question of adjustment, but I couldn't turn them when the door was closed. However, my husband Peter found this task easier.

An electrically operated 'Techno Step' helps entry to the living accommodation, but it isn't that 'techno' as it doesn't have an audible alarm to warn you when you drive off without retracting it. Neither does it automatically put itself away. This is a feature that would be well worth paying extra for, but unfortunately it's not offered as an option on the Lagan.

The step was a tiny bit high for me, and if you are feeling tired after a bike ride or long walk, there's a grab handle to help your return to the 'van. Above this is a large mirror; crucial for



*The step is electrically operated, but there is no alarm or automatic retraction when starting the engine.*



*The inboard water tank, and pump, fills the space beneath the offside settee.*



Upfront, a single-leg table is flanked by two short settees. Swivel cab seats join in to help make the lounge/diner.

adjusting your balaclava before setting off for a long trek!

Three-tone blue geometric upholstery (which would not show the odd bit of mud from a careless cyclist or rambler), is complemented by an attractive oatmeal-coloured carpet. The carpet is removable, with a parquet-effect vinyl underneath. Methinks that the sort of folk that might use this 'van would prefer to remove the carpet, thus making the inside easier to sweep. If motorcaravanning in winter, you can easily pop it back in - as it's much nicer to get out of bed onto warm carpet.

Beech-trimmed wood-effect cabinets, with silver handles, make doubly sure that the interior looks modern.

It was whilst sitting at one of the dinette seats I noticed the Lagan was somewhat lacking in natural light. This was despite having the usual complement of windows. What a difference a big rooflight would make; we have all come to expect the improvement to ambience that they bring.

However, you have to bear in mind that, if you want a lot of motorcaravan for your money, then

compromises have to be made. Retrofitting when funds allow may be an option.

**MCMOTORING**

The 2.3-litre Fiat diesel engine whooshes this 'van along nicely, especially when unladen, while it will still perform with alacrity when loaded. The sensible ratios of this gearbox mean that fifth gear is low enough to offer useful acceleration from 50mph. The Fiat controls are all set out in a configuration that suits me (at five feet two inches). The one gripe I have is with the handbrake, which is low down on the right-hand side. However, because it's positioned on the right, it's well out of the way when moving from cab to caravan, so I can forgive this small failing.

The cab seats are fitted with a single armrest for each. The armrests are not upholstered and the seats feature a different fabric to the rear cushions. However, it's the same colour range as the rear upholstery, so these seats look as if they belong to the general scheme of things.

Better practice your singing as there is no radio fitted to the cab and only the driver is equipped with a door storage bin. It will be worth fitting one of these for the passenger door. After all, it's usually the passenger who does all the navigating, and one of those door pockets will easily accept a large road atlas.

If a written itinerary is your bag, there is an inbuilt clipboard on top of the dashboard. This can be raised for better visibility of notes. Also, there are plenty of other cubbyholes and niches to keep all your bits and pieces handy when travelling.

**MCLOUNGING**

I found my feet were nowhere near the floor whilst seated in the lounge (which doubles as a diner), but I have to admit this is usually the case with this sort of seating. After all, designers have to cater for so many different sizes of people in motorhomes. To be fair, if I sat right on the edge of the seat, which is how I would normally eat my rations, I could just reach the ground. The seats were deep enough to accommodate Peter's long legs.

The table, positioned on a substantial single leg, can be slid from side to side and swivelled. It is removable and is utilised to help make the front bed, though like most Continental tables, it's heavy.

Six friendly people could sit in the lounge with the cab seats swivelled. However, I think I'd leave the table up as no dedicated stowage is provided for it. It's easy to get past the table to the cab seats, as you can slide it right back and across until it meets the back of one of the settees. This



Though the cab seats lack the same upholstery as the rear, they are close in colour and style. The Fiat cab wears its familiar face, albeit with few toys.



The substantial table is multi-positional, and utilised when making up the front bed.



The lounge and dining space is both comfortable and versatile..



There's not a huge amount of worktop in the L-shaped kitchen.

leaves the central aisle clear for passage.

A lot of these heavy Continental tables drive me to distraction. However, if there are only two of you aboard (which is probably the norm) this one could be left parked out of the way and still be very usable.

For comfortable evening lounging the two cab seats, with their adjustable rake, will be the most relaxing. Alternatively, you could stuff a pillow in the corner of the nearside settee (which has a switched 230V socket and heater outlet underneath it) and get your feet up on the front

passenger seat. The TV cabinet is high up on the nearside, with 230V and 12V sockets inside. This is definitely 'cricked-neck' height for me, - but outdoor enthusiasts won't have time to watch TV. Beside the TV's home are two open shelves with a suggestion of a restraint along the front edges.

**MCDINING**

Six very friendly and trim folk, with no elbows, could maybe use the table to eat, but four could eat in a civilised fashion arranged with one each side on the settees and one on each of the front

seats. The table once again scores here as it's so manoeuvrable. You can slide it right out of the way to enable the diners to get to their seats - and its mechanism is simple but very effective. I never thought I'd ever praise a Continental table! You still can't use it outside, but apart from that it's pretty good.

One large high-level locker resides above the offside settee. This is a budget 'van so I would expect such economies, and I've found that packing your worldly goods is often less tricky when - as here - there are no interior divisions to contend with.

Instead of lockers with doors above the cab there is a wide, open shelf. This has a generous up-stand preventing the contents from falling out. Books, binoculars and other things you might need to grab quickly would find a home here. But it could be your breakfast store for packets of cereal, bread container and other such essentials.

Either side of this shelf there is more open storage, but it goes in around a corner to a smallish deep area (useful for oddments not often used). It may not have a door, but because access is through a hole cut in a locker with plenty of wood around the edges, things are unlikely to fall out.

**MCCOOKIN'**

The cooking facilities in the L-shaped kitchen are fairly basic when compared with more expensive motorhomes. There's no oven, and the hob has no spark ignition, but there is a grill. McLouis has been kind to us Brits; toast and marmalade will be on the menu! The three-burner Smev hob has a hinged glass lid, and a separate grill box positioned below. A 50-litre Vittrifrigo three-way fridge (with full-width freezer compartment) takes up the rest of the space.

The fridge was difficult to open (as the wardrobe



No spark ignition for the grill and hob, but the purchase of a piezo-electric lighter will remedy this shortcoming.



Overhead locker storage includes a TV locker that proved to be at an awkward angle for viewing.



The roomy washroom was popular, even with my husband.



An easily adjusted showerhead was good, but the curtain could have done with another foot of fabric width.



The fridge was difficult to open because the wardrobe side prevented my fingers getting hold of the door.

abouts it and this prevented me from getting hold of the door). Like most fridges, there is no surface-mounted handle. A solution would be to retrofit a small knob. If the door was arranged to hinge the other way it would not open so far.

Around the corner above is the circular stainless steel sink. Not much worktop was free for food preparation but, to be fair, the available

worktop is about the same as in most kitchens of this configuration. The sink, with a swivelling mixer tap and a nice long spout, is well designed. It has a beautifully rounded bottom (shut up you lot) so no difficult corners to clean.

A large cutlery drawer and cupboard lie beneath, facing the caravan door. Gas isolation valves for the hob, fridge and heater are secreted in this cupboard. Once again, I found no bin or provision for one. No matter, it's sometimes easier to put a decent rubbish bin where you would like it rather than have its position prescribed by the manufacturer.

There are two large overhead lockers here for all your kitchen paraphernalia. They are not blessed with shelves, but plastic food storage containers would stack up neatly to utilise the space effectively. Placed below, above the hob, is a single 230V socket. The control panel and single striplight are placed alongside. There are easier and safer places for this socket to be located, as the flexes of appliances could easily trail across the hob.

**MCWASHIN'**

The washroom functions well. There is plenty of room for the job for which it was designed and even my husband, who finds fault with most washrooms, agrees. You can do a lot of scrubbing without cracking your elbows. An adjustable showerhead riser means we were both happy with the shower. The easy-dry webbing-style mat didn't slide about and shouldn't rot. This idea seems much better for a shower cubicle than conventional carpet.

A decent-sized corner basin (with a drained non-slip rest for the soap), two lights overhead, a large mirror each side, a heater outlet, a toilet roll

holder, and one of the best towel rails I've seen, make this washroom a winner. I mean... the towel rail goes right across the door, so that your towels might actually dry.

Plenty of shelves and a plastic cupboard should meet with most storage needs, though the cupboard had a difficult, slippery handle and the magnetic catch was very strong. If your hands were wet there would be no chance of getting it open, but at least you won't find the contents strewn across the floor once you've pitched. One more little niggle: they could have been more generous with the width of the shower curtain.

A swivel-bowl toilet with electric flush, and good natural light from the obscure window completes this practical, spacious washroom.

**MCSLEEPIN'**

A solidly secured ladder leads the way to an expansive double bed above the garage. The ladder can be removed and is neatly fed through a slot, hidden by an upholstered flap, into a dedicated stowage place in the garage. The garage can also be accessed from the interior via a side-hinged door.

This is a bed long enough for a Dutchman, and wide enough for the most restless sleeper. The mattress is quite relaxing and certainly more comfortable than many Continentals I've tried. On the offside are two overhead lockers with two adjustable spots underneath, so that you can read your book into the night.

This room has windows on two walls with which to light your mornings, and each window has an open shelf. This gives you an ideal place to store all the essentials for a comfortable night; somewhere to put your glasses and wig, perhaps? Each shelf has a lip to stop things



*The access ladder for the fixed double bed neatly slides away into its own dedicated storage slot in the garage.*



*The table is pressed into service as part of the dinette single bed base.*



*The rear bed ladder is short, and leads to a big, comfy double bed.*

rolling off should it get windy, and the 'van start to rock in the night.

However, there is a complication. If you to sit up where the reading lights are positioned, there is limited headroom. You could sleep the other way

round, but the other end of the bed lacks lighting and the window located here makes it difficult to sit up in bed without damaging the cassette blind. Most solutions in motorcaravan design are the best compromise that can be arrived at in the

circumstances. In the scale of things it is pretty small beer not being able to sit up in bed quite so easily. Older, or less agile, sleepers might worry much more about having to tackle a ladder when nature calls in the middle of the night. My advice is always try before you buy.

Well-placed, at the bottom of the ladder on the right, is a good sized wardrobe with a cupboard underneath. This cupboard houses the gas-fired boiler that provides hot water and space heating.

Upfront, a single bed is made using the table and the cushions of the twin settees. Because it is not an overly large table, it is easier than some to manoeuvre. The table drops on to ledges and the four settee cushions form the mattress. Because these are shaped, they don't make the flattest of beds.

**SPLIT PERSONALITY?**

Despite its somewhat confused nationality, this 'van knows where it's coming from. It is a basic, good value motorhome. Someone who needs plenty of storage, for whatever takes their fancy, will find oodles of space in the cavernous garage.

And 'budget motorhome' doesn't have to mean bad design. Just look at that washroom; many more expensive motorhomes are equipped with washrooms that are not nearly as user-friendly as the Lagan's. The dimensions of the room, and the





Truma's capable Combi provides heat and hot water from its home below the wardrobe.

decent-sized basin, plus plenty of storage, and the fixtures and fittings, all boost its ratings.

The conveniently positioned spare wheel, just inside the garage door, was another big plus for this 'van.

A lot of complaints about motorcaravan beds would be silenced if the beds were all of the generous size found in the rear of the Lagan, while the mattresses were supportive and comfortable.

The McLouis Lagan 253 is missing some refinements in areas such as the kitchen, but as one of the cheapest low profile motorhomes on the market, it's well worth a close look. Even more so when you consider it offers huge storage capacity and an excellent payload. □



**IN BRIEF**

- **Base vehicle:** Fiat Ducato 15 MWB platform cab
- **Engine type:** 2.3-litre (110bhp) turbocharged and intercooled, common-rail diesel engine
- **Gearbox and drive:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Make and model:** McLouis Lagan 253
- **Body type and construction:** Low profile coachbuilt, GRP-skinned sandwich construction with moulded GRP skirts, overcab, rear bumper and front corners
- **Conversion NCC badged as EN1646 compliant:** No
- **Electrical equipment:** 230V hook-up and consumer unit with MCB and RCD, two mains sockets in living area, 230V mains and 12V sockets in TV cabinet, battery charger
- **Lighting:** Two diffused lamps in living area ceiling, one above kitchen worktop and one in garage, two adjustable spots at head of fixed bed, two downlighters in washroom
- **Cooking facilities:** Three-burner hob and grill, both manual ignition
- **Refrigerator:** '3-Ways' by Vitrifrigo, capacity 51 litres, freezer compartment 6.9 litres
- **Water heater:** Truma Combi 3402, gas-only operation
- **Space heater:** Truma Combi 3402 3.4kW, gas-only operation, outlets in dinette, washroom, garage, beside caravan door, below fixed bed
- **Fresh water tank:** Inboard, 100 litres (22 gallons)
- **Waste water tank:** Outboard, 90 litres (19.79 gallons)
- **Gas locker capacity:** Two 11kg cylinders

- **Rear restraints:** None fitted
- **Additional features:** Large garage that could take several cycles or a scooter (max garage loading 100kg – subject to available payload). Well proportioned washroom with large mirrors, unobstructed access to large basin, removable non-slip easy-dry mat, two large storage cabinets, towel rail on back of door. Removable access ladder to bed stowed under garage roof. Useful shelves above windows in fixed bed area. Access to garage from living area. Spare wheel stored in garage. Swivelling front seats. Thermal screens for cab windows. Electric step

**DIMENSIONS**

- (\*data supplied by manufacturer)
- Overall length: 5.99m (19ft 8in)\*
  - Overall width: 2.22m (7ft 3.5in)\* excluding mirrors
  - Overall height: 2.74m (9ft 0in)\*
  - Interior height: 2.00m (6ft 6.5in) reducing to 1.9m (6ft 3in) behind cab
  - **Bed dimensions:**  
Fixed double 2.05m x 1.25m (6ft 8.5in x 4ft 1in), available headroom 820mm (2ft 8in)
  - Front single 2.10m x 800mm (6ft 10.5in x 2ft 7.5in)

- **Maximum authorised weight:** 3400kg\*
- **Load capacity:** 1080kg\* (excluding 'habitation allowance' - please check with importer for full details)

**PRICE** (all prices include VAT)

- As tested: £29,998 (on the road)
- **Warranty:** Two years base vehicle and caravan, four years water ingress

**OPTIONAL EXTRAS**

- **Base vehicle options:** Cab air-conditioning (£1800)
- **Caravan options:** Comfort package comprising remote central locking of cab doors, electrically-operated windows, electrically-adjustable mirrors (£865); three-speed extractor fan for roof (£325); TV locker slide-out arm (£60); ramp for scooter access to garage (£90)

McLouis Lagan 253 kindly supplied for evaluation by: Don Amott Leisure Ltd, Hilton, Derby DE65 5FJ (tel: 08454 560582; web site: www.donamott.co.uk)

E & OE

